

BACKGROUND ESSAY: WHY DID THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION BEGIN IN ENGLAND?

"The Industrial Revolution" refers to the highly significant shift in the means of production of manufactured goods from hand-made to machine based systems. While the Industrial Revolution is typically said to have begun in the 1700s, changes have been ongoing since that time, including the facilitation of mass production of goods due in great measure to development and use of factories. As it was work in the textile or clothing businesses that had used slower, manual processes, it was natural that much of this so-called Revolution occurred in this area, particularly as demand increased due to population increases. Countries that had conditions that could somehow support the resultant shift from manual to machine production experienced industrialization first.

As it happens, the Industrial Revolution began in England, spread to western Europe in the early 1800s, followed by the United States in the following decades. From there, it continued to spread across the world, creating change not only in the way textiles and nearly all other goods were produced, but change in how people would live their lives.

The spread of the Industrial Revolution from England to Continental Europe and North America greatly increased the already considerable advantages the Western powers possessed in manufacturing capacity as well as their ability to wage war relative to all other peoples and civilizations. These advantages resulted in ever higher levels of European (and American) involvement in the outside world and culminated in the virtually unchallenged domination of the globe by the Western powers by the last decades of the 19th century.

Beginning in the 1870s, the Europeans indulged in an orgy of overseas conquests that reduced most of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Ocean region to colonial possessions or spheres of influence by 1914. Essentially, the world economic order was remade to industrial Europe's specifications. According to the new global industrial division of labor, Europe and increasingly North America provided finance and machine capital, entrepreneurial and managerial talent, and manufactured goods. The rest of the world provided raw materials for Europe's factories, cheap labor, and abundant, if not always fertile, land. This created an enormous wealth and power gap between developed, industrial nations and developing or undeveloped nations.

In the late 19th through the 20th century, nations who were not a part of this initial wave of industrialization in the West scrambled to survive and keep pace with the industrialized European powers. Governments and nationalist groups studied the factors that allowed nations to obtain modern industrial institutions, and then took great pains to create their own industrial revolutions based on the western European model. Some nations were more successful in these efforts than others. However, it was England who is credited with being the first to lead this global revolution that began in the 18th century and which led to the incredible changes that occurred on a massive scale in the 19th and thereafter.

WHY did England experience this revolution first? What factors did she possess that allowed her to become the first nation to industrialize and take advantage of the wealth and power that accompany this transition?

~adapted from McDougal Littell's Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction and B. Schwartz' Industrialization And Western Global Hegemony Industrial Rivalries And The Partition Of The World

